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The Role of Education in the Empowerment of Women in a District of West Bengal, India: Reflections on a Survey of Women

By Haimanti Mukhopadhyay¹

Abstract

This article aims to probe the role of education in the empowerment of women in the district of Malda, West Bengal, India. In an exhaustive survey comprising forty two villages, the article tries to unearth the status of women, attitude towards girls' education in society, problems hindering the education of women, the importance of marriage in women's life affecting education as well as the empowerment of women. The article also highlights that educated and economically empowered women have said a firm 'no' to the prevalent malice of the dowry, thus directly bearing the fruit of economic empowerment in society of Malda district of West Bengal. Finally some recommendations have been made to eradicate the practice of intra-household and social discrimination of girl child and women. Empowerment through education has emerged as the only way to put an end to the horrors of dowry, as established by the survey.

Keywords: Women, discrimination, dowry, education, economic empowerment, survey

Introduction

The empowerment of women in India has been obstructed for centuries owing to various reasons amongst which the initial blow was in the form of depriving women from basic educational facilities. Beginning with the Rig Vedic period (Singh, 2004) Indian women were denied political powers. The denial of many basic rights continued to plunge downward during the later Vedic period, with further plummeting through forthcoming centuries. During the eighteenth century women suffered from several handicaps like female infanticide, sati², purdah³, child marriage, illiteracy and subsequently forced child widowhood in the 19th century. Women were treated no better than domestic animals. Moved by this extreme plight, great social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, M.G. Ranade, D.K.Karve and Mahatma Gandhi were in the forefront, fighting against social atrocities toward women (Jha and Pujari, 1998).

¹ Haimanti Mukhopadhyay, M.Phil. is currently working as Principal, Anuradha English Medium School, Chikhli, Buldana, Maharashtra- 443201. India. E-mail m.haimanti@gmail.com. I belong to an educated, middle class family, so unlike many of the women interviewed for this essay, my own education up to my graduation was not a problem for me. I received both support and opportunities for my education, which is common in middle class families in India. Also, being in the 'Brahmin' caste, (the teaching community since ancient Indian times) also assisted the cause of my education. I got married after my graduation and continued my post-graduate education with my determination and my husband's support.

² Sati is defined as 'the rite whereby the widow burns herself at the funeral pyre of the husband' (Sharma,1988)

³ Purdah, a word of Persian origin, used as veils or curtains, popularly used by Muslim women still in India. (Mathur 2004) Purdah defines the limits of freedom and outlines the margins, which confers anonymity and erase women's selfhood.

Women discovered their own potential and played an equal part in India's struggle for freedom (Barua, 2003). Many women came to be accepted as great patriots in their own rights. The freedom struggle of India was the platform where women again proved themselves. Women's participation in the revolutionary movement (Mehta, 2004) was significant even when they were deprived of basic human rights in men's world. The list of women in India who contributed to the movement for equality is enormous. To name just a few, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Vijaylaxmi Pundit, Aruna Asaf Ali, and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur took up the fight on several fronts. (Jha and poojary, 1998)

The preamble to the Constitution of India promises full equality to all citizens in all respect. Women's development saw a reflection in the Indian constitution wherein laws were enacted to eradicate the social evil of inequality, five-year plans and voluntary actions by women, state sponsored programmes like rural Mahila Mandals and local self government, participation in social and women's welfare programmes through voluntary action and finally the demand for reservation in political institutions (Pandey, 2002)

Literacy among women

In independent India, illiteracy is the second most important problem following poverty. Female literacy rates are very low nationally. A look at the statistics relating to female literacy reveals a grim picture. Though the female literacy rate has progressively increased from 8.86% in 1951 to 15.34% in 1961 to 21.97% in 1971 to 29.75% in 1981 to 39.42% in 1991, it is still below the desired level (Maitr and Sinha, 1993). Comparing these rates to male literacy is 63.68%, it is clear that female literacy is neglected. This gap ultimately contributes to the subordination of women and greater dowry⁴ demand in the marriage market. Among the literate women only a handful of women obtain their education in order to acquire economic independence; for the majority, literate women receive an education only to become more eligible in for marriage (Johnson and Johnson, 2001).

The link between female literacy rates and development is obvious and has received much attention in the development literature. For example, Rajasthan, which has a very low female literacy rate, is still burdened with widespread practices like 'sati', female foeticide and child-marriage. On the other hand, Kerala, which has a high female literacy rate, is almost devoid of all these practices except the practice of dowry. Although the government has undertaken many programmes for the development of women, and in spite of the equality of status guaranteed under the Indian Constitution, double standards prevail in every sector of society and in the crucial sectors of health, education and social development. Moreover, the social isolation of women contributes to the deterioration of their condition. In spite of the Indian Government's effort to secure justice for women through laws against crimes, the result is far from satisfactory. Without proper education, legal literacy and social awareness it is impossible to elevate the status of women.

In spite of changes in society, its patriarchal nature continues to benefit males. Education has never been viewed as a tool to develop the overall personality and

⁴ Dowry is defined as 'demands from husband's family during marriage' (Menski 1998). The term in contemporary India refers to the goods that the groom and his family receive from the bride's family at the time of the marriage, over which the bride retains no ownership.

capabilities of women. More than acquiring economic and social freedom for women on par with men, the society has viewed education as a requisite for a good marital relationship, as a pre-requisite for obtaining a good match (Shurei, 1997) and for the better upbringing of children in the 20th century. Even in today's so-called highly modern society, girls are still not regarded as full persons. There continues to be resistance against viewing women as professionals, as economically independent person, and parents and the society still wish to see her as a dutiful wife and mother first, a professional, if at all necessary, last.

Even though, after independence, considerable developments have taken place in the lives of women, there remains a bleak picture. A majority of women are still underprivileged in a tradition bound society like ours, where there is a distinction between lawful legitimacy and general practice. "In spite of women's contribution towards family income, their position in the family hierarchy mostly remains subordinate" (Nandal, 2005). The societal attitude is still discriminatory against women. In India more than 6000 women are killed every year because their in-laws consider their dowries inadequate (UNICEF, 2000). Some problems to be given topmost priority are female foeticide (Census India, 2001), female infanticide, malnutrition, illiteracy, child marriage, dowry harassments and dowry deaths (Rastogi and Therly, 2006), domestic violence, sexual harassment in society as well as in the workplace, bonded labourers, poverty, and police neglect and harassment.

This essay is an attempt to explore the discrimination women are still facing in society, and how education has made an indelible impression in curbing the practice of dowry through creation of empowered women in society. I conclude by analyzing the situation of women who are still lagging behind.

Methodology

Personal interviews were conducted to find out the role of education in empowering women against dowries. The survey took place in West Bengal, a state of eastern India over a period of one and half months (August-September) in the year 2005. West Bengal has an area of 88,752 sq. km. It shares a long border with Bangladesh in the east, Bihar and Orissa in the west. The district of Malda is situated in the north Bengal on the bank of river Ganga. Malda district has an area of 3455.66 sq. km. Its total population is 3,290,1603 (2001 census). I had personally visited 204 women from forty-two villages of Malda district of West Bengal of India. The findings of the study are constituted from personal interviews with respondents, using a prepared questionnaire. Raw data pertaining to the 204 women have been analysed and grouped.

The language spoken in West Bengal is Bengali; therefore the interviews were mostly conducted in Bengali. Respondents who are highly educated also chose to give their answers in English. The respondents were chosen randomly from the entire district. Malda district is predominantly dominated by Hindus and Muslims. Data was collected from all castes⁵ of the women of the Hindu religion. Malda district is inhabited by Sunni Muslims, so all the Muslim respondents in this survey belong to the above community.

⁵ The caste systems, although outlawed in 1947 with Indian independence, remains a powerful, de facto, traditional, hereditary systems of social classification, based on endogamy, occupation, economic status, and ethnicity. A person is considered a member of the caste into which he/she is born and remains within until death. (Ghurye 2005).

Participants

In this survey I collected information from both the rural and urban areas of Malda district. There were 26% urban and 74% rural respondents. Respondents of this survey are from different economic strata as well as representing different educational levels. I had the opportunity to interview some women who never had been to school and had no scope of education, who constitute 6% of the interviewees. Among the women, 26% has primary schooling up to secondary education; 20% studied up to higher secondary levels. Undergraduates and graduates represent 27% of total respondents. Post graduates represents 11% while another 11% of respondents' educational qualification is higher than post graduation. In addition, 26% are employed and 74% are unemployed. Among the employed women 70% are employed by the government, 20% are employed with NGOs and 10% are employed in small private enterprises.

The age at marriage of the respondents is also a very important factor, which indicates the status of women in society and their place in their family. In this survey it is revealed that a considerable number of women (32%) from lower economic strata (income Rs 3000/ per month) with very little education got married at an early age, on average of 14/15 years. The percentage of respondents married below 18 years are as follows - 2.9% at 10 years, 2.9% at 12 years, 5.9% at 13 years, 5.9% at 14 years, 29.4% at 15 years, 41.2% at 16 years and 11.8% at 17 years. Marriage below 18 years is illegal and this practice of early marriage overburdens women with early motherhood spoiling their opportunity to get an education. This is a common feature in interior villages, and the lack of education and knowledge contributes to the ongoing practice of child marriage generation after generation.

The economic distribution of the economic condition of respondents is as follows: the majority of the women (44.5%) are from the household earning up to Rs 3000/, 18.8% up to Rs 6000/, 12% up to Rs 9000/, 12% up to Rs 12,000/, 4.2% up to Rs 15,000/, 3.7% up to Rs 18,000/, 1.0% up to Rs 21,000/, and 4.2% up to Rs 30,000/.

Even though I had prepared a questionnaire, often free discussions emerged particularly with the issues surrounding the birth of a girl child, the status of women in society, respondent's own status and problems faced in the home as well as in society. Other discussions included the view that dowries are an inhuman demand with negative effects on poor families, girls of marriageable age, on the right of parental property, domestic violence and sexual harassment. Thus, although I went there to complete a questionnaire, as I moved through the village women, I could see the real problems and hardships they faced. Though most of these village women were illiterate or educated up to primary level, the advancement in thinking and clarity was astonishing and an eye-opener for me. Most of them were extremely vocal against the dowry system. It was clear that uneducated village women suffered more than the educated and economically independent women. But as the subsequent discussion will show, almost all women opined against the dowry system irrespective of class, educational qualification, caste and religion.

Survey results: priorities in general education

In Malda district there is preference for boys in education and parents are accustomed to take their studies with more seriousness. The reason for this preference, as narrated by the respondents, is that it is the societal norm (Roy, 2003) that boys must become economically independent. Families place the most importance on the marriage of their girls. When I asked some of the women the reasons for their illiteracy, they responded that it was because of their parents' negligence that they never had been to school. The same parents have, however taken many pains to send their sons to school. According to these respondents, their parents never felt the need for their girls to get educated. These women, a victim of their parental negligence, told me that they feel very ashamed when they are unable to help their small children in their present educational pursuits. It is noteworthy, however, that a majority of the women (62%) expressed a keen interest in educating their daughters. So, there is a very positive change at least among women in Malda district who are much more concerned about their daughters' education, when compared to their previous generation, as I have seen and felt during the survey.

Problems affecting women's education

The findings of the survey show that even at the primary level of education poverty is the most significant factor shaping opportunities for women's education. Two of the elderly respondents mentioned that they worked as domestics to obtain their primary education. She and her sister faced severe economic problems as well as parental negligence in their childhood which deterred them from getting an education. Today they are extremely interested in educating their granddaughters. Other problems which deterred women from getting an education, as cited by the respondents, are parental negligence and early marriage (**Fig.1**). Responsibilities for the family or the death of mother or father also emerged as reasons for the compulsory dropout from school at an early age as girl children had to take care of their younger siblings (Bagchi, Guha and Sengupta 1997, Feliciati 2006). Many poor, uneducated villagers do not attribute much importance to the education of girls. Early marriage is another common feature leading parents to withdraw their girls from school, and once they are gone, very few girls return to school, according to a senior teacher. In a hurry to get them married, some girls fell into the wrong hand. As a result they have to suffer a broken marriage at a very immature age. Thus, economic problems are the main hindrance deterring women from getting an education, coupled with early marriage and parental negligence playing an important part in the ultimately deteriorating status of women.

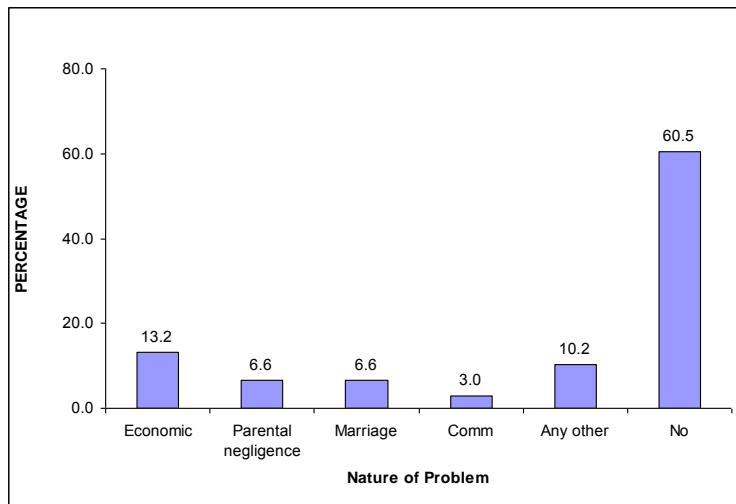


Fig. 1 Various problems affecting the education of women Source: Field Survey

Respondents' continuing education after marriage

Even though few girls return to school once they are married, as they age, the goal of obtaining an education increases. The surveys indicated a number of women decided to continue with their education. But for the majority (53 percent) of the women, it was not possible for them to complete their education up to their satisfaction. Women had to discontinue their studies just on the ground of getting married. At the same time amongst women (65 percent) who decided to pursue their studies after marriage, a majority of them were compelled to quit midway. This reveals the abysmally low importance of education of a woman in her family. Among all respondents only 47 percent of women could complete their education satisfactorily after marriage. Though the percentage is lower than the women who could not complete their studies satisfactorily, this does demonstrate some changes in the understanding and attitude towards women's education. This is a positive sign wherein the society of Malda district has changed for better.

Source of help to complete education for married women

Most of the women who continued their education and completed it satisfactorily, obtained help mainly from their parents and husbands (31.3% both). They were determined to fulfill their dreams (31.3%). A very few women cited that they got help from their parents-in-laws (6.3%). So far, surveys show that parents and husbands have been the constant source of support for many women in completing their education, a very positive sign.

Education influencing the practice of dowry

As the results of the survey indicate, there are few factors which can increase or decrease the demand of a dowry. One such factor is the economic empowerment of women. In the lowest educational strata, incidents of a dowry are highest and here the average age of marriage is only 16 years. Respondents who were educated up to the secondary level married at the average age of 18; and those who had achieved higher secondary education married at the average age of 21. In all cases, incidents of dowry was also very high.(Fig.2). However, when the average age of marriage was 24, cases of

a dowry came down considerably and the majority of women were married without a demand for a dowry. It is important to mention that graduated women who had economic independence constituted the group saying a strict ‘no’⁶ to dowry. So, it is revealed that economic empowerment enabled by proper education has a sizeable impact in the downfall of the dowry system in the society of Malda district. Women educated up to post-graduation and beyond were inevitably found to be employed. I observed that almost all of them were very confident and in control of their lives, reflected in part by a very high percentage of women refusing a dowry as a condition for marriage.

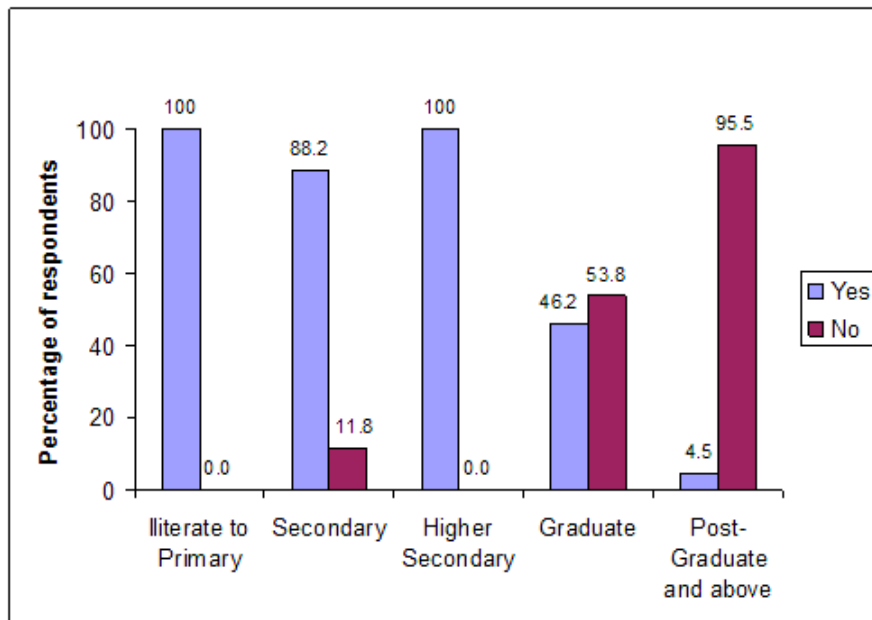


Fig. 2 Role of Education in refusal of system of dowry in women
Source: Field Survey

Conclusion

Overall this study confirms that women’s status is inferior to men’s in Malda district. Women face discrimination within families as well as in society, where society maintains double standards in the case of education, marriage, spousal relationships, domestic violence, laws of patriarchal society, property laws, dowry system, sexual morality, sexual harassment as well as discriminatory social stigma and also less recognition and respect for women’s work.

Implications

The survey indicates that prevailing intra-household discrimination in educational matters for girls and women persists. Therefore, a strong message needs to be conveyed in support of education and economic empowerment as equally important for both the sexes. Education emerges as the single most important parameter empowering women. Education builds the way for economic empowerment and uplifts the status of women. Reducing the gender gap in secondary and higher education should be the focus area.

⁶ As narrated by educated and economically empowered participants of the survey.

Marriage only at mature, legal age is also crucial. Women should get married only after receiving an education or after acquiring some skill, which can make her economically independent.

The survey suggests that there should be more importance placed on the economic empowerment of women. As women rise in economic status, they will gain greater social standing in the household and the society granting greater voice in important issues. Not only does economic empowerment fortify the position of women, it serves as a deterrent to dowries. The parental property should be distributed to sons and daughters on an equal footing so the responsibility of looking after parents falls to all offspring. As women's economic power grows, it will be easier for them to take care of their parents, to become a respectable member of their natal family, and to overcome the tradition of "son preference."

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